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## Food Conscious: Farmers recruit combat veterans

Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer  
Wednesday, September 24, 2008

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A few years ago, Matt McCue was a U.S. Army infantry soldier trampling through fields and farms in Northern Iraq looking for enemy weapons. Today, the 26-year-old veteran traipses through 15 acres of fennel, beets, chard and kale as manager of the French Garden farm in Sebastopol, a job secured for him by a fledgling Bay Area organization dedicated to helping vets learn to farm.

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Craig Lee / The Chronicle

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"There was a sense that our farms had something to offer, not just for the soldiers coming back but for the whole nation," says Michael O'Gorman, a founder of the new **Farmer-Veteran Coalition** and the former production manager for Del Cabo, an organic tomato-growing cooperative in Baja.

### A win-win

Sensing a brewing epidemic of unemployed vets in rural areas, O'Gorman and several other California peace activists with ties to agriculture spotted a win-win solution. With a little assistance, returning combat vets could find healing and productive work on farms, while communities burgeoning with locavores would benefit from new recruits to local food production.

McCue, who started his farm job in December, grows produce for the affiliated French Garden restaurant and for several Sonoma County farmers' markets.

"I feel like this has helped me set my future up," says the **vet**, who cites the home gardens and pomegranate orchards of Iraq as inspiration for his interest in farming. "I even fantasize about going to Iraq and working as an extension agent."

The **coalition** recently held its first benefit dinner, at the French Garden restaurant, and netted enough money to lay the legal foundation required to apply for grants. With funding, a paid outreach coordinator will be able to connect with vets through military job fairs and veterans' groups.

"We want to get the word out to these young men and women that this is not your grandfather's farm," says O'Gorman. "This is a new time. You can get into farming with a lot less money doing regional production. You don't need to inherit 640 acres."

For the past year, O'Gorman has volunteered his time as

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a consultant to vets who are new to farming. Among his proteges is Colin Archipley, a Marine who did three tours in Iraq. At Archi's Acres near San Diego, Archipley now grows avocados and hydroponic basil and tomatoes and welcomes other vets for two- to three-month apprenticeships.

Farming "is a good thing for vets, especially Iraq vets," says Archipley. "We lose a lot of our social skills, and when we come back, we don't want to mingle with people back on the block. We talk a different language." On the farm, says Archipley, vets can find satisfying work that doesn't require daily interaction with customers.

O'Gorman points to the recent Slow Food Nation event in San Francisco as a sign of the appetite for locally grown food and the urgent need for new lifeblood in agriculture.

"This whole exciting, dynamic revolution in food production is not going to happen if we don't have young men and women go into farming," says O'Gorman.

### New purpose

For many soldiers returning from combat, growing food may be the ideal transition. "I think a lot of the depression in the military spawns from not having a purpose," says McCue. "What is your life going to be defined by? In the military, if you get into an altercation, your life is defined by tragedy. My life is defined by growing and harvesting things, and there's a lot to be said for that."

For information about the **Farmer-Veteran Coalition**, call (707) 981-8010, or visit [www.farmvetco.org](http://www.farmvetco.org).

**Food Conscious** stories look at issues surrounding where our food comes from. For previous stories, see the links with this story at [sfgate.com/food](http://sfgate.com/food).

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**anadya** 9/25/2008 8:38:12 AM

When a handful of corporations are feeding the entirety of America I can see how it's hard to believe that they are capable of employing all of our veterans. Because they can't. But locally run farms, spread out across the nation, can. And that's only one of so many positives that come from local food production, distribution, and consumption. Doesn't it make you feel good to know exactly what you're putting into your body, and by that, where



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**sfnative1969** 9/25/2008 6:28:09 AM

It's stories like this that make me roll my eyes. Yeah, I understand that the "locavore" trend is uber-hip now and it's all about being "sustainable" and "healing the planet". And I understand that these earthy-crunchy-granola types who (rightly) oppose the war(s) and want to support the troops would like to portrayed as doing something to "support the troops", but REALLY, how many vets can be employed by these hipster yuppie-feeding farmers? Am I supposed to drink the Kool-Aid and be a part of this "revolution"?

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that story made my day. (and well said, anadya)

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